

Topographies of Interference

Jocelyn Monahan and Jeff Curran

Artist's Statement

The video footage for this project was shot within the borders of Council Bluffs, IA, from March 11-16, 2014. Since 2007, Google has opened two data centers in the city. Intrigued by the increasing trend by big tech companies in building server farms in the Midwest, we decided to go capture the transformations, slippages, and interferences between agriculture, industry, ag-industry, and the new information economy as reflected in the landscape. Throughout the video you can see farmland, trains, power plants, grain elevators, the Con-Agra logo, and Google's primary color scheme hinted at on the outside of the first data center they built in the city.

What became apparent as we documented the town's visual and aural landscapes was that the presence of industry and agriculture in the city was much more visible than that of Google. Power plants and grain elevators marked the city's skyline; railroads curved through and around the city. MidAmerican Energy, ConAgra, and other logos appeared on trains and signs. Google, in comparison, was remarkably invisible. The thin stripes of primary colors and a temporary sign printed on plastic with their logo at the first data center was the only evidence of their presence we saw in the city; at their second location, some of the construction workers weren't even sure if the building was owned by Google or not.

Once we found Google, though, the overlaps in landscape we had been looking for became easy to spot. Google's first data center in the area was across the road from an empty field, but bounded by a major road and a FedEx shipping plant. Their new location was settled in the middle of 1,000 acres of farmland they purchased at the same time as the first location, and requested the city rezone the space from agricultural to industrial land. Near both of Google's locations, a number of new housing developments had sprung up against farmland. And from nearly every location in the city we shot, the power plant rose up in the background.

"Topographies of Interference" is meant to provoke viewers into thinking about information services' material presence in the world, and to relocate the vision of large tech companies as primarily urban centers to one that highlights their presence in more rural communities, which often receives less attention.